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Exploring the interface of relationship marketing and export performance

A conceptual perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to develop a comprehensive model that explains the influence of different relational variables on export performance and the interaction between those relational variables.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a theoretical paper building upon the relational variables and export performance literatures.

Findings – A theoretical model was developed based on the existing studies and findings. In the proposed model, relational outcome variables mediate the effect of relational contextual variables on export performance.

Research limitations/implications – The model developed in this study opens new avenues for future research because it provides a different perspective on how relational variables interact with each other in terms of their impact on export performance.

Practical implications – Relational variables have great importance for firms' export performance. This study provides a framework about how these variables affect export performance, which should be taken into consideration in firms' strategies and decisions with regard to the relations with partners.

Originality/value – Despite the consensus about the importance of relational variables, the evidence is mixed with regard to the way they affect export performance. With the proposed model, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a framework that explains how relational variables interact with each other and how they affect export performance.

Keywords Adaptation, Relationship, Export, Trust, Commitment, Communication, Cooperation

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

With the rapid growth of globalization and the decline in trade barriers, there has been an increase in international activity. Exporting is at the forefront of all of the methods of internationalization and is of great importance to both companies and countries. Firms enhance their overall performance via exporting (Filatotchev and Piesse, 2009), and it also helps countries to grow their economies and create jobs (Katsikeas *et al.*, 2009). Traditionally, the economic perspectives have dominated the literature about the success factors for exporting. However, in the highly competitive business environment, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have increasingly used entrepreneurial marketing (EM) practices (Gilmore, 2011). EM is defined as "the spirit, an orientation as well as a process of passionately pursuing opportunities and launching and growing ventures that create perceived customer value through relationships by employing innovativeness, creativity, selling, market immersion, networking and flexibility" (Hills *et al.*, 2010, p. 7). EM has received a lot of attention from the literature as a discipline (Eggers *et al.*, 2012). Firms need to have EM practices to be successful in international markets, and the studies provide empirical evidence on the positive impact of entrepreneurial practices on the performance (Morris *et al.*, 2002). EM becomes more important in highly dynamics environment such as international business (Whalen *et al.*, 2016). Especially, in these types of complex and turbulent environment, EM has been analyzed in terms of its implementation with traditional marketing practices (Solé, 2013). A stream of literature has focused on the synergistic effects of these two practices. In this stream of literature, EM has been linked to relationship marketing in terms of the effect on a firm's performance (Blocker *et al.*, 2012). Relationship marketing examines the determinants and outcomes entrepreneurs' ties with different stakeholders (Friman *et al.*, 2002). Developing sustainable relationships and investing in those relationships are some of the practices used by these companies (Chaudhry, 2007).

Especially, relationship marketing has extensively been used as customer-value based marketing activity by all types of companies (Tan Swee Lin and Smyrnios, 2007). Firms constantly face competition not only from existing competitors but also from new entrants. Holding onto their existing customers is the only way to survive in this competitive environment. Relationship marketing is a very effective strategy to develop long-term sustainable relationships with customers. For instance, American Airlines uses a frequent flyer program to maintain a continuous relationship with its customers, which increases the loyalty. Therefore, relational approach has received increased attention by scholars over the last decade (Matanda and Freeman, 2009), which is also referred to as *behavioral perspective* (Leonidou *et al.*, 2002a). Some other researchers have used *relational paradigm* as a concept to refer it (Pressey and Tzokas, 2004; Styles and Ambler, 2000; Zhang, Cavusgil, and Roath, 2003). SMEs have limited tangible resources and they must also rely on intangible resources to help sustain their competitive advantage. They use different marketing and brand-related strategies (Odoom *et al.*, 2017). They develop relationships with other parties, in addition to exchanging goods and services. Relation-oriented competencies are means of creating value (Ndubisi, 2011) and are very critical to the success of exporters (Styles *et al.*, 2008) because they enable firms to retain their customers in the long-term (Ritter and Andersen, 2014). The relationship between the exporters and their customers, especially in the case of direct exporting, has emerged as an issue of major concern within the international marketing field, and several studies have been conducted on the performance implications of these relationships (Navarro-García *et al.*, 2016; Styles and Ambler, 2000, 1994). This increased attention reflects the importance of relational factors as determinants of export performance.

The relational paradigm has been studied in a growing number of studies (Navarro-García *et al.*, 2016; Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). Relational variables have been viewed very critical for the success of exporters (Leonidou *et al.*, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2003). The majority of the studies have independently looked at these variables in terms of how they affect export performance (Ismail *et al.*, 2017). However, studies of the mediating and moderating effect of relationship variables on export performance remain limited (Obadia *et al.*, 2017), and there is some disagreement over the exact roles of these variables. Hence, there is no consensus on how these relational variables interact with each other in regard to their impact on export performance. Bloemer *et al.* (2013) reported this issue and indicated that the roles of trust and commitment should be reconsidered in terms of their impact on export performance. Similarly, there are calls for a better understanding of trust (Welter, 2012) and commitment (Rocha *et al.*, 2012) in terms of their effects on performance. Rather than examining relational variables in a direct way, in a commentary essay, Sinkovics *et al.* (2010) urged scholars in the field to focus on relationship dimensions and export performance by developing comprehensive sets of mediating and moderating effects. In this study, our aim is to develop a model that explains the influence of different relational variables on export performance. More specifically, we want to understand the key roles of trust and commitment, and the interactions of these with other relational variables (adaptation, communication and cooperation) in terms of their influence on export performance.

We categorize relational variables into two groups as relational contextual variables and relational outcome variables. *Relational contextual factors* are adaptation, cooperation and communication, whereas *relation outcome variables* have been identified as trust and commitment. Based on relational exchange theory, we propose that relational contextual variables influence relational outcome variables, which in turn affects export performance. Hence, we argue that the influence of relational variables on export performance is mediated by the relational outcome variables of trust and commitment.

In developing this model (See Figure 1), we contribute to the marketing and international business literature and provide insights by examining the relationships between relationship variables and export performance. There is a consensus about the importance of relational variables, but the evidence is mixed with regard to the way they affect export performance. With the proposed model, we aim to fill this gap by providing a framework that explains how relational variables interact with each other and how they affect export performance. This sheds light on the determinants of export performance, which is a highly relevant area of study in international business literature. Moreover, in marketing and EM literatures, relationship marketing has an important role especially in turbulent environments such as international business. There is a consensus about the critical role of relationship marketing as an EM practice, but we do not know much about how these variables are used to enhance export performance, where entrepreneurial skills are very important. With the proposed model, we aim to open new avenues of research in this stream as well. To summarize, we believe that the proposed model has implications for EM, relationship marketing and the export literatures, and that it will open new avenues for future research. The proposed model also has important implications for practitioners. The research in this important area is fragmented, and there is a need for a comprehensive framework that provides an overview of how relational variables interact with each other. We believe that the model proposed here will guide managers in how they approach

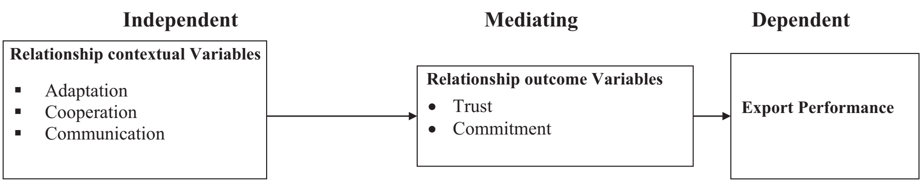

Figure 1.
The conceptual framework

relational variables and indicate how they can enhance their direct export performance with these variables.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. A comprehensive literature review is provided in the Section II. In Section III, we develop the model and propositions. Finally, in Section IV, we discuss the implications and suggest directions for future research.

Literature review

Determinants of export performance

Exporting is critical to many companies because it allows them to internationalize in the easiest way; thus, it has started to draw attention in the marketing literature (Leonidou and Kaleka, 1998). Many studies have been conducted to examine firms' export performance and the factors that are associated with export success (Pinho, 2016). Interest dates back to the innovative study of Tookey (1964), who identified the type and quality of a product, the size of a firm, export policies, export marketing channels and the use of export services as determinants of export success. The structure-conduct-performance (SCP) framework has been the most-used model for studying success factors in exporting. This framework is based on industrial organizations, and most of the variables used are associated with it. The determinants of export success can be grouped into managerial characteristics, organizational factors, firms' market targeting and segmentation elements, environmental factors and marketing mix variables (Leonidou *et al.*, 2002b).

Managerial characteristics, which pertain to the managerial, experiential and personal attributes of decision makers (Leonidou *et al.*, 2002), are among the most thoroughly studied group of variables. Aaby and Slater (1989) identified management perception, awareness and attitudes as the most important determinants for export success. Managers' international experiences are documented in most studies as having positive influence on export sales, growth and profits (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994).

Organizational factors are another set of variables that affect export success. They refer to elements that are related to a firm's characteristics. For instance, firm size is highly studied in this regard, but there is mixed evidence about its effect on performance (Aaby and Slater, 1989; Zou and Stan, 1998). A firm's commitment to export markets is also considered a key determinant of export success, with a positive effect on export success (Cavusgil and Manek Kirpalani, 1993; Naidu and Prasad, 1994; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994). The strategies of a firm such as marketing and strategic orientation are also relevant, both of which positively affect the performance (Chahal *et al.*, 2016). The impact of market segmentation on export performance has also been found to be equivocal, positive (Cooper and Kleinschmidt, 1985; Leonidou *et al.*, 2002) and insignificant (Zou and Stan, 1998). In another study related to the strategy, Dikova *et al.* (2016) found the diversification strategy to positively influence export performance. Similarly, He *et al.* (2016) demonstrated the importance of strategy and showed that the companies that incorporate transaction-cost factors in their decision-making become more successful in exports.

Environmental factors are variables that relate to the macro environment in which a firm operates. These factors can be related to both export markets and industry. There is a stream of literature that has studied the impact of environmental factors on the export performance (Gao *et al.*, 2010). Export market attractiveness (Cavusgil and Zou, 1994), government barriers (McGuinness and Little, 1981), the development level of the country (Shinkle and Kriauciunas, 2010) and the industry characteristics of technological intensity and manufacturing complexity are among the environmental factors that affect export success. Furthermore, variables related to marketing mix strategies, product adaptation (Dominguez and Sequeira, 1993; Leonidou *et al.*, 2002), channel support (Cavusgil and Zou,

1994) and the types of distribution channels (Zou and Stan, 1998) influence export performance.

As can be seen, numerous factors have been considered as determinants of export success in past studies. However, there is wide disagreement over the nature of the factors that lead to export success. Although certain traditional views about export performance, such as the resource-based view (RBV) of firms (Morgan *et al.*, 2004), are well established, there are few studies about the role of marketing in export success. Moreover, most of the existing theories are for large multinational enterprises. However, compared to large multinationals, SMEs have less resources and expertise and use other methods such as EM, which is found beneficial especially for SMEs in turbulent environments (Solé, 2013). So, the success factors are not the same for SMEs and large multinationals (Beneke *et al.*, 2016), which creates a need to investigate SMEs. EM practices are proposed as critical tools for the success of firms in international markets (Kilenthong *et al.*, 2016). Innovativeness, creativity, networking and flexibility are among some of the factors used in the definition of EM (Hills *et al.*, 2010). EM has been as complementary to marketing (Webb *et al.*, 2011), and the interrelationships between two have been studied in terms of how they affect firm performance (Atuahene-Gima and Ko, 2001). However, a distinct literature about EM as a school of marketing thought is also established (Homburg *et al.*, 2013). In this stream of literature, EM is also linked to an important marketing element, i.e. relationship marketing. For instance, Macht (2014) investigated the process of crowdfunding for entrepreneurs and proposed relationship marketing as an important technique in this process. Although relationship marketing is one of the important practices of EM, it is understudied in terms of its impact on export performance. However, EM is more important in turbulent environments (Solé, 2013), which is the case in exporting process. In this study, our goal is to respond to calls that emphasize the need for a better understanding of export performance (Khalid and Bhatti, 2015) by developing a comprehensive framework of the relational antecedents of export performance.

Relationship marketing

In an increasingly competitive environment, firms rely on relationship marketing practices to keep their customers loyal. Many of the successful industry leaders follow relationship marketing approach such as that of Ikea. The company has strong relations with its customers and actively takes their feedback into consideration in its processes. Relationship marketing becomes even more important in international settings such as exports. Exporters interact with their buyers, and there is a social exchange in addition to the exchange of goods and services, which is critical to the success of the transaction. Relational exchange theory (Macneil, 1980) is the most widely used theoretical explanation of exchanges between businesses. Its central construct is relationship quality (Jap, Manolis, and Weitz, 1999), and the theory underlines the social exchange mechanisms that develop as a result of trust and relational bonds (Wathne and Heide, 2000). In the international marketing literature, social exchange emphasizes the social contexts in which market exchanges take place (Ellis and Pecotich, 2001). Relationship marketing is built on these social exchanges with a partner. Relationship marketing is defined as "establishing, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with customers and other partners at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met, which is achieved by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (Gronroos, 1990, p. 138).

In general, developing a relationship with a partner can be viewed from two perspectives: attracting the buyer and establishing a relationship with that buyer (Gronroos, 1994). In exporting, the relationship with the buyer is crucial, because of the large geographical and psychological distance separating the exporter from the buyer, which then increases risk. Moreover, international operations take place in a complex and turbulent environment, which leads to high uncertainty. The essence of relationship marketing is to lower uncertainty and to enhance collaboration, commitment and adjustments between partners (Anderson, 2001). Therefore, relationship marketing by definition requires the development of knowledge regarding a customer's needs, interactive communication and establishment of a relationship that leads to success. To fulfill this range of demands, different constructs in this paradigm have been borrowed from other disciplines (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Ahmed *et al.* (1999) identified six main theoretical perspectives that relationship marketing has been derived from. According to the first view, which is the *transaction cost perspective*, the proprieties of the transaction determine the governing structure and the institutional arrangement of the firm. In this view, there are three key dimensions on which the proprieties of transactions differ: asset specificity, environment/behavioral uncertainty and transaction frequency (Anderson and Gatignon, 1986). Developing a relationship with a partner depends on the levels of these dimensions.

Second, is the *relationship exchange theory* developed by Macneil (1980); it is a widely used framework based on social exchange and interpersonal relationships and has an important perspective that explains inter-firm relationships via an emerging relationship paradigm. A number of studies on relationship marketing (Gronroos, 1994; Styles and Ambler, 1994) have been largely based on relationship exchange theory, which emphasizes the critical role of managing the buyer-seller relationship. Theoretical and empirical work in relationship marketing identifies key factors that contribute to long-term relationships such as commitment, trust, cooperation, communication and shared norms.

A third theory, i.e. *resource dependence theory*, proposes inter-firm governance as a response to the uncertainty arising from the environmental and information asymmetries (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). The main argument of the theory is that a firm seeks to lower uncertainty and manage dependence by establishing formal and informal links, or long-term relationship, with other firms.

A fourth perspective, *interaction and network theory*, views the marketing and purchasing of goods and services as based not only on financial returns but also on the exchange of information and an evolving business relationship. Partners develop relationships through interactions, which foster subsequent business between them. The role and importance of the firm within a network, and the strength of its direct or indirect relationship with other firms, is called its *network position*. Network has been a very important concept (Ndubisi, 2011) and also is included in most of the definitions of EM (Hills *et al.*, 2010). Inter-organizational networks help firms to save resources as well as to share the risks (Kofler and Marcher, 2018). In the development of these networks, social embeddedness and relationships play a crucial role (Kofler and Marcher, 2018). This has triggered a stream of research that looks at how firms manage their relationships in these networks (Ndubisi, 2011; Nasution *et al.*, 2011). For instance, building trust is proposed as one of the important drivers of successful relationships (Johri and Petison, 2008). In a similar vein, Scholes, Mustafa and Chen (2016) demonstrated the influence of relational factors on networking, which in turn affects international performance.

Fifth, the *political economy paradigm* can also be used to look at relationship marketing. This paradigm is based on political science, sociology and organizational theories integrated to classify the interactions of partners (Stern and Reve, 1980). According to this view, a social system influences collective behavior, and it is developed via interactions between economic and socio-political forces. The political economic paradigm consists of two major systems: the internal and external political economies. Internal factors concern the relationship between parties, whereas external factors are related to environmental forces.

Sixth, *cross-cultural management* focuses on the transactions across cultural boundaries and looks at culture as a kind of mental programming representing sets of shared values that legitimate social practice. The role of culture is demonstrated in the distribution channel relationship (Johnson *et al.*, 1996) and in relationship marketing (Conway and Swift, 2000). Each of these theories has largely enhanced our knowledge with regard to the nature of business relationships.

Relationship marketing and business performance

Increasing levels of international competition have led to changes in the buyer-seller relationships (Heide and Stump, 1995). In particular, there is a trend toward closer ties between buyers and sellers (Navarro-García *et al.*, 2016). Developing relationships is more important for small firms because they have limited resources. The most recent changes in marketing theory and practice favor a shift towards customer relationships. Competitiveness and the changing dynamics of the global marketplace increase the need for relationship marketing as well (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Relational capabilities are especially important for companies in the initial stages of export expansion (Khalid and Bhatti, 2015). These changes have resulted in a stream of literature that examines the effects of relationship marketing on various aspects of firm performance, including export performance.

A significant number of studies have looked at the relationship between relationship marketing and business performance (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Leonidou *et al.*, 2014; Styles and Ambler, 1994; Yau *et al.*, 2000). Many studies specifically looked at export performance and found positive effects from forming and developing relationships with business partners (Navarro-García *et al.*, 2016; Ahmed *et al.*, 1999; Styles and Ambler, 2000; Styles and Ambler, 1994; Lee and Jang, 1998). Similarly, Addison *et al.* (2017) found a positive association between intellectual capital sharing and trust/commitment, which also positively affects performance. However, some studies have found contradictory results. For instance, Ju *et al.* (2014) found the relation between relational governance and performance to be an inverted U-shape. There are also a few studies that failed to find any significant effects of relational variables on export performance (Beleska-Spasova *et al.*, 2012). A group of other studies proposed a contingent approach. For instance, Ju and Gao (2017) found that the relational governance has a positive affect only in the long-term, but not in the short-term. However, in general, there is a positive effect that can be explained by the reduced uncertainty faced by exporters, which enables exporters to proactively deal with the dynamic environment more. Moreover, this relationship reduces the likelihood of opportunistic behavior and transaction costs, and increases the chances for new business opportunities.

Relationship valence, cooperation, communication, relationship commitment, prior *guanxi*, satisfaction, personnel friendships, trust and adaptation are some of the variables used to assess the impact of relationship marketing on export performance, and it is usually found that they positively affect performance. However, there is an argument that the importance of relationship depends on factors such as the environment, time and the characteristics of a company. For instance, Pressey and Tzokas (2004) argue that the effects of relationships become weaker over time.

To summarize, several aspects of relationship marketing have been studied in different ways, in terms of how they relate to firm performance. However, the interaction of these variables and their relative importance in terms of export performance is still not clear. In this study, we aim to group these variables as relationship contextual and outcome variables, and determine their relation to export performance.

Conceptual model

Relationship contextual variables and relational outcome variables

Several variables have been used to examine relationship marketing. As indicated in the previous section, we grouped these into two categories: relationship contextual variables and relational outcome variables. Adaptation, cooperation and communication are relationship contextual variables, whereas trust and commitment as relational outcome variables (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). In our proposed model, we view relationship contextual variables as antecedents of relational outcome variables. In this section, we develop propositions about the effects of these groups of variables.

P1. Relationship contextual variables positively affect relational outcome variables

Adaptation

Adaptation takes place when a change is made by a party to accommodate the other party's needs. It is also viewed as a change in firm procedures or adjustments of work done in the firm (Leonidou and Kaleka, 1998). Adaptation can take different forms such as adaptation in product specifications, design, delivery procedures, financial procedures, organization structure, and production processes (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). Adaptation can also involve investment in resources such as human resources, processing procedures and new product development (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). However, studies that follow a transactional approach in analyzing buyer-seller relationships have mainly focused on product adaptation (Cavusgil *et al.*, 1993; Shoham, 1998).

Adaptation as it relates to inter-firm relationships is explained through social exchange and resource dependence theory (Hallén *et al.*, 1991). Studies have examined adaptation either from the supplier's or customer's point of view or both. Because sellers often establish relationships with foreign buyers, the seller is usually expected to adapt behaviors and procedures to suit the foreign buyer (Ford, 1984). Because of the high uncertainty in international markets, it is impossible to foresee all contingencies, and this makes flexibility very valuable (Collins and Hitt, 2006). Flexibility and adaptation especially become very important in the early stages of internationalization because it is not possible to draw on past experience. Although the majority of studies have found empirical evidence for the positive effects of dimensions of adaptation on a firm's performance (Fuchs and Köstner, 2016; Brouthers *et al.*, 2013), there are some cases where adaptation was detrimental to success (Sousa and Lengler, 2009) or insignificant (Sousa and Novello, 2014).

Adaptation is one of the critical factors in relationship development, implying that both parties are engaged in a relationship in which they can modify their products, procedures, processes, services or administration to suit the other partner. Adaptation provides value to either or both parties and reflects the quality of the relationship (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Hence, in addition to being a response to the demands of the market, adaptation is an effective way of establishing a business relationship (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). The relationship paradigm views adaptation as an essential element of inter-firm relationship and trust building (Brennan *et al.*, 2003; Hallén *et al.*, 1991; Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). Adaptation affects the degree of trust (Hallén *et al.*, 1991) and commitment (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). The level of the supplier's willingness to adapt to the buyer's or customer's needs indicates the level of mutual commitment and trust for both parties in their working relationship.

Within the exporter-importer relationship, a high level of adaptation signals a high level of trust and commitment, and the partners' willingness to adapt in a relationship provides the impetus to build a trustful exchange relationship. Furthermore, adaptation plays a critical role in matching the supplier's market offering to the customer's needs (Brennan *et al.*, 2003). The perception that the seller is making a substantial investment can significantly influence the vendor's benevolence. To summarize, adaptation is critical in terms of sending a signal to the partner and developing trust and commitment. Based on the above discussion, the following propositions were developed:

P1a. Adaptation affects trust positively.

P1b. Adaptation affects commitment positively.

Cooperation

Cooperation refers to a situation where both parties in a relationship work together to achieve common goals (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In a cooperative process, parties come together and engage in interactions with each other to develop relationships for their mutual benefit (Smith *et al.*, 1995). Relationship exchange theory considers cooperation an exchange behavior that focuses on the importance of interpersonal contact and benefits to the partners (Campbell, 1998) and as a result enhances the performance (Brito *et al.*, 2014). Cooperative behavior is a critical success factor for relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The ultimate goal of any organization that is engaged in an inter-firm relationship is the achievement of objectives that are hard to achieve alone, which makes cooperation an important goal for companies. Cooperation strengthens competitive and cost advantages (Bello and Gilliland, 1997), enhances the innovativeness of firms (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2013) and increases the chances of survival for exporters (Obadia *et al.*, 2017).

Cooperation has been studied in the context of relationship marketing (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000) and has been viewed as a part of developing a relational intention of commitment and trust. Cooperation encourages commitment in any working relationship (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000), and it leads to trust, which results in a greater willingness to cooperate in the future (Anderson and Narus, 1990). However, there is no agreement on the direction of the relationships among cooperation, trust and commitment, and studies have produced contradictory findings. For instance, contrary to the findings stated above, Morgan and Hunt (1994) claimed that cooperation is a result of trust and commitment. Their argument is that, out of desire to enhance a good working relationship when partners are committed to each other, they will cooperate more (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). However, Anderson and Narus (1990) argued that past cooperation leads to current commitment and trust. In either case, these differing views indicate the importance of cooperation as an element of an exchange relationship and the need for a model that shows the clear relationships among these variables.

Although this relation may depend on the context, we believe that cooperation is a driver of trust and commitment. A firm needs to know its partner to develop trust and make commitments. The more information and experience a firm has with its partner, the more it will trust and commit to that partner. Cooperation is a great chance to get to know a partner, which definitely improves trust and commitment. Trust can lead to more cooperation in the future, but the development of that trust starts with cooperation, even on a small scale. The following propositions were developed based on these considerations:

P1c. Cooperation affects trust positively.

P1d. Cooperation affects commitment positively.

Communication

Communication is the act of sending a message to another party and making it understood in an appropriate way (Anderson, 2001). In an exchange situation, its role is to provide mutual benefits for both parties, promote confidence in the maintenance of the relationship, reduce dysfunctional conflicts and achieve coordination through the sharing of information between channel members (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Anderson and Weitz, 1992). Communication is considered a means of information exchange and is an important factor in both the neoclassical and relationship paradigms. However, in relationship marketing, communication plays a critical role because it provides information about the other party's intentions and capabilities; as a result, it forms the ground for the development of relationships.

In a working relationship, communication among partners enhances their exchange aims, resources and structure, which builds a foundation for improving relationships. Thus, communication establishes conditions for formulating effective commitment and trust between exchange partners (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Anderson, 2001). A majority of the studies that have examined the relationship between communication and trust have reported significant connections (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000) as well as a direct significant relationship between communication and commitment (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000).

In any ongoing relationship, information exchange is necessary for managing the relationship process (Selnes, 1998). Effective communication allows partners to develop a shared understanding and prevents inadvertent misunderstandings, improves confidence, resolves disputes and decreases the susceptibility to engage in opportunistic behavior (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). Moreover, partners come to know each other better through good communication, which lowers information asymmetry. As a result, partners trust each other more and become more committed to the relationship. To summarize, communication is a means to build successful relationship exchange, which improves trust and commitment. The following propositions were generated based on the above considerations:

P1e. Communication affects trust positively.

P1f. Communication affects commitment positively.

Relationship outcome variables and export performance

Firms, especially those with limited resources, have increasingly looked for external resources, such as relational capabilities, to improve their export performance (Kaleka, 2002). Relationship exchange has a positive effect on exportation (Lee and Jang, 1998). This positive impact has been explained from a social exchange theory perspective, which argues that the interaction between parties fosters the exchange of social and material resources (Cook and Emerson, 1978). Social capital, which is the combination of resources derived from strong community ties (Putnam, 2000), accrues from these exchanges. Social capital has a collective value based on trust, reciprocity, information sharing, cooperation and control (Gu *et al.*, 2008).

Trust and commitment have been identified as central constructs in relationship activities, and they are the main relationship competencies that affect export performance

(Bloemer *et al.*, 2013; Styles *et al.*, 2008). They contribute to success in relationship marketing by improving a firm's productivity and effectiveness (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). They also positively affect innovativeness (Matanda *et al.*, 2016). Previous studies have hypothesized an indirect relationship between trust and performance such that the higher the trust in the relationship, the greater the long-term commitment to it, which in turn enhances business performance (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Styles and Ambler, 2000). Similarly, Ismail *et al.* (2017) found an indirect effect of trust on competitive advantage via commitment. In another study, Leonidou *et al.* (2011) examined commitment and trust in terms of their effect on adaptation, and found that trust affected adaptation via commitment. As noted above in the literature review, there is no consensus on how relational variables interact with each other, which creates a need for a comprehensive framework. In our model, we treat trust and commitment differently and propose that both have a direct positive impact on export performance outcomes, the details of which are discussed in following sections.

P2. Relationship outcome variables affect export performance positively.

Trust and export performance. Trust is at the core of any business relationship, particularly when the relationship is sustained over the long term (Kumar *et al.*, 1995). Trust has become an increasingly important topic associated with inter-organizational relationships in international business studies, although researchers have perceived it in different ways. According to Moorman *et al.* (1993), trust is a firm's willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom it has confidence. Similarly, Geyskens *et al.* (1999) define trust as the degree of belief that a firm has about its partner in terms of honesty and/or benevolence. Credibility and benevolence (Ganesan, 1994; Doney and Cannon, 1997) have been proposed as central aspects of trust. In addition to firm lever variables, the home country of firms affect the trust between partners as well (Ertug *et al.*, 2013).

Trust is very important to companies, especially small firms that have limited operational resources, and it has drawn huge interest in the literature. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) added trust to their traditional Uppsala internationalization process model, which indicates the importance of trust for exporters. In many studies, trust has been identified as one of the main constructs in relationship marketing (Smith and Barclay, 1997; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Moorman *et al.*, 1993) and has been found to be the central factor distinguishing an effective from an ineffective selling partner relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). It is also often considered a vital factor and a fundamental building block in a successful business relationship (Conway and Swift, 2000).

Previous studies hypothesized an indirect relationship between trust and performance; i.e. a greater level of trust increases the level of commitment, which in turn enhances business performance (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Styles and Ambler, 2000). However, a direct relationship between trust and export performance has also been noted (Styles and Ambler, 2000). In addition, some studies have developed a contingent approaches about the impact of trust on performance. For instance, Katsikeas *et al.* (2009) proposed that trust is more important under conditions of high interdependence.

Trust has a reciprocal effect: buyers and sellers must trust each other for an effective exchange to occur. Trust plays a central role in affecting relationship commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Moorman *et al.*, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) because the risk of opportunistic behavior and transaction costs decline with high levels of trust (Abosag and Lee, 2013). Moreover, it reduces the need for a formal contract because the partners have confidence in each other's behavior (Gulati and Nickerson, 2008). Hence, trust is a very effective governance mechanism that can discourage opportunistic behavior in a partner (Fang, Sinkovics, Cavusgil, and Roath, 2007).

Trust is not a substitute for a formal contract, but serves purposes beyond a formal arrangement (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2004). With less uncertainty regarding a partner's behavior, a company can take more risks (Sankowska, 2013), which, in turn, has a positive effect on performance. Trust also positively affects knowledge transfer (Wu *et al.*, 2007); it counterbalances the potential harmful effects of cultural differences and allows for a continuous flow of knowledge between partners. Based on these observations, we propose that trust has a direct impact on export performance.

P2a. Trust positively affects export performance.

Commitment and export performance. One of the main tenets of relationship marketing is building a long-term relationship with the customer, which creates many benefits for the supplier such as controlling costs, enhancing profitability and sustaining growth (Kalwani and Narayandas, 1995). Several studies have demonstrated the positive influence of a long-term relationship on performance (Styles and Ambler, 2000; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). A long-term collaborative relationship provides several benefits. For instance, a long-term supplier is more interested in customer needs, which require mutual planning for the future. This results in an ongoing information exchange, faster adjustments and the development of a mutual strategy for generating long-term competitive strength (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000). For the supplier, a mutual commitment will lead to better product development progress, increase market share and reduce the distributor's interest in promoting competing brands (Hibbard *et al.*, 2001).

Developing a long-term relationship furthermore reinforces the commitment from each partner in a relationship (López-Navarro *et al.*, 2013). Commitment allows the partners to work cooperatively and helps them to create long-lasting partnerships and reduce transaction costs (Lee, 2016). Commitment in relationship marketing is defined as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The committed partners work together to satisfy customer needs in better ways, which enhances profitability. Commitment to a relationship indicates a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain a long-term connection (Anderson and Weitz, 1992), and in business, partners can perform better with more commitment than if they try to operate independently. Commitment also motivates a firm to invest resources and capabilities in maintaining and strengthening its partnerships, which in turn fosters the mutual exchange of market information and technology at an advanced level.

Most previous studies of export performance have investigated the impact of commitment on performance (Matanda and Freeman, 2009; Cavusgil and Manek Kirpalani, 1993; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994; Naidu and Prasad, 1994). Most of these studies found a positive impact. Styles *et al.* (2008) go one step further and argue that commitment is part of a cycle driven by a firm's perceptions of its partners' commitment. Consistent with above arguments, Styles and Ambler (2000) showed that commitment has a positive influence on export performance. Based on these observations, we developed the following proposition:

P2b. Commitment affects export performance positively.

Mediation by relationship outcome variables

Relationship marketing, by definition, "refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relationship exchange" (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Inter-firm relationships are very valuable strategic assets, especially when they are rooted in trust (Sankowska, 2013; Fuglsang and Jagd, 2015) and commitment (Vahlne and Johanson, 2013). Although the majority of studies propose a direct impact of relationship quality on performance, some studies have developed models with mediators because the impact of relational variables can be both direct and indirect (Zhang *et al.*, 2003). For instance, Styles *et al.* (2008) developed a model where trust and commitment mediate the relationship between relational skills and export performance. However, not all relational variables were included in that model, and there is an additional layer of mediators such as commitment. Our aim in this study is to identify the mediating effects of relational variables and develop a comprehensive model that takes into account the interactions among all of the relational variables.

Although there are several components of relationship marketing, trust and commitment are the central variables to be considered in regard to developing a relationship with a business partner (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). We consider trust and commitment as potential mediators in the link between relational variables and export performance. Relationship commitment and trust develop when both firms try to build a relationship by providing benefits to one another, maintaining cooperation and exchanging valuable information. Trust and commitment help partners cooperate with each other and foster the belief that the relationship is not susceptible to opportunistic action. Therefore, when commitment and trust are present together, they affect a firm positively in terms of improved productivity and effectiveness (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment often go hand-in-hand, and there is a positive relationship between them (Bloemer *et al.*, 2013).

The impact of trust and commitment on performance has been found to be both direct and indirect. For instance, Pinho (2012) showed that trust mediates the effect of commitment on cooperation, which influences performance. Commitment, which affects performance positively (Bloemer *et al.*, 2013; Cavusgil and Zou, 1994), has also been found to be driven by trust (Styles *et al.*, 2008). As can be seen in the literature review, there is no consensus on how relational variables interact with each other.

The common definition of *trust* in relationship marketing is that it is a generalized expectation of how each party behaves in the future. This expectancy is derived from the various experiences within the relationship (Selnes, 1998). These experiences accumulate via relationship contextual variables: communication, cooperation and the adaptations made to preserve the relationship. All these variables foster trust between partners because they reduce uncertainty and the risk of opportunistic behavior. Moreover, trust among partners is the outcome of working together, keeping promises and avoiding cheating (Day *et al.*, 2013). All these happen with the relational contextual variables, as indicated earlier. Therefore, we propose that the impact of relational contextual variables is mediated by trust, which has a positive influence on export performance.

Commitment, which is the second mediating variable that we propose, is also affected by relational contextual variables. Cooperation and communication are important means of developing commitment in a relationship (Zineldin and Jonsson, 2000; de Ruyter *et al.*, 2001). Cooperation is a process whereby parties come together, interact and develop relationships for their mutual benefit. The extent of cooperation among the exchange partners fosters good working relationships and enhances the achievement of mutual goals. Moreover, cooperation, along with other relational variables, consolidates relations over time (Griffith and Zhao, 2015). Therefore, it is imperative that the partners work to cooperate; this fosters trust and commitment, which in turn affect performance. Similarly, a good, ongoing communication relationship helps develop trust and commitment, although it does not have a direct effect on performance.

Based on the above considerations, we argue that the impact of relational contextual variables on export performance is not direct. Instead, this impact occurs via the mediating variables of trust and commitment. In other words, relational contextual variables have a positive effect on relational outcome variables, trust and commitment, which in turn have a positive effect on export performance. The mediation argument is summarized in the following propositions:

P3. Relationship outcome variables mediate the relation between relationship contextual variables and export performance.

P3a. Trust mediates the relationship between adaptation and export performance.

P3b. Commitment mediates the relationship between adaptation and export performance.

P3c. Trust mediates the relationship between cooperation and export performance.

P3d. Commitment mediates the relationship between cooperation and export performance.

P3e. Trust mediates the relationship between communication and export performance.

P3f. Commitment mediates the relationship between communication and export performance.

Discussion

Firms have increasingly internationalized, and exporting has become a critical growth strategy with the rise of globalization. Because of the increasing involvement of firms in the export process, we have seen a growing interest in the determinants of export performance. Globalization of the business environment and the need to compete in different markets has increased inter-firm marketing partnerships (Aulakh *et al.*, 1996). For firms, developing strong relationships is considered a condition for successful business practice (Yau *et al.*, 2000). Relationship marketing has gained much more importance compared to classical avenues of marketing mix elements to have success in exporting (Rich, 2000). Relationship marketing has also be seen as an important part of EM practices, which has been studied extensively as separate literature (Homburg *et al.*, 2013). Entrepreneurial practices become even more important in international settings where firms need to be more pro-active. Therefore, relationship marketing has an important place in terms of EM practices. Firms view customer relationships as strategic assets that should be developed and maintained to cope with increasing competition and pressures on pricing. The establishment of close ties between buyers and sellers from different countries is considered a successful performance factor in the relationship marketing literature (Ahmed *et al.*, 1999). Research in relationship marketing has focused mainly on buyer-seller relationships and on the behavioral factors governing relationship marketing. This approach emphasizes that the exporter and the importer can be equally active in their relationship and that it is critical to study the factors that define this relationship to understand the export process (Leonidou and Kaleka, 1998). Maintaining a close working relationship with overseas distributors is a success factor in exporting. Despite the large number of studies about the critical role of relationship marketing on export performance, we do not know how exactly relationship variables interact with each other in regard to their effects on export performance. In other words, a disagreement exists in the literature about the exact role of relational variables in export performance. To fill this gap, we developed a model that shows how relationship variables affect export performance.

To construct the model, we first defined the relationships between relationship contextual variables and relationship outcome variables, commitment and trust. We proposed that adaptation, communication and cooperation have a positive effect on trust and commitment. There is no consensus in the literature on how all these relational variables interact with each other. With this model, we aim to provide a framework that can be used to understand these variables better. According to our model, firms that communicate and cooperate know each other better, lower uncertainty and enhance trust and commitment. Adaptation also sends a signal to a partner and improves trust and commitment between the parties. We also demonstrated the positive impact of trust and commitment on export performance. Then, we proposed that trust and commitment are mediating variables in the relationship between relationship contextual variables and export performance.

The main theoretical implication of this study is that the relationship contextual variables (adaptation, cooperation and communication) indirectly affect export performance via the mediation of relational outcome variables, commitment and trust. We believe that the proposed model in this study will shed light on the relationship marketing and export literatures. The model offers a better understanding of the interactions between relational variables and export performance. Moreover, this model provides a comprehensive framework for studying relational variables and their impact on export performance. Our study has also implications for EM literature as EM practices play an important role in internationalization of firms.

Our study has also practical implications. As indicated earlier, relationship marketing is an emerging field, and companies have started to realize its importance, especially in their internationalization processes. Therefore, a good understanding of the interactions between relational variables and the way they affect export performance has a critical value for exporters. This is especially very important when companies engage in direct exporting where they have direct interaction with customers. We propose that trust and commitment are the main drivers of export performance, but introduce adaptation, communication and cooperation as key antecedents of trust and commitment. Exporters need to consider all these aspects to achieve sustainable performance in their export processes. An awareness of the exact effects of each relational variable can help managers to improve their firms' export performance.

There are several areas to explore for future research. First, our model needs to be tested in an empirical setting. The measurement of variables in our model is well established in the literature. All of them can be measured by surveys of exporters. This will allow to see if the model is supported by data. It would also be interesting to see whether the applicability of this model varies across countries because the impact of relational variables on export performance can vary across cultures, product life cycles and institutional settings (Khojastehpour and Johns, 2015). For instance, Ju *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that the impact of relational variables becomes less important in uncertain industry environments. Similarly, Pressey and Tzokas (2004) showed that the effects of a relationship weaken over time. Samaha *et al.* (2014) compared developed and developing markets and showed that the effectiveness of relationship marketing varies across different cultures. Consequently, there is a need to clarify the variables that moderate the impact of relational variables on export performance. It is very important for firms to know under what circumstances relational context become more or less important. For instance, the duration of the relationship can be a potential moderator because the impact of relational variables may vary across time. Therefore, the conditions that affect the impact of relational variables on export performance constitute an area that warrants attention for future research. Moreover, the majority of existing studies examine this issue in the context of developed countries; there is a need for more studies from emerging markets as they become increasingly more important in international business. Another area that has potential for future research is the importer side. Most of the existing studies focus on the exporter, which is only one side of the story. Because these relationships are developed between two parties, future studies should consider the other side of the dyad, i.e. the importer.

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